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## Casper community helps plan high school construction

By JACKIE BORCHARDT Star-Tribune staff writer | Posted: Friday, May 6, 2011 3:30 am

Arranged in groups and connected by pipe cleaners, the colored blocks didn't look like a school until Allan Akers described it.

The largest group of blocks was the "commons," or central gathering space. The groups surrounding it were departments, but not in the way most traditionally think of them. Each subject area had a large space with smaller rooms and offices nearby.

Akers, a junior at Natrona County High School, will never get to go to the school he sketched nor one like it. He said he's OK with that.

He wants Natrona County's future high schools to move past old rivalries to provide the best education for students, which is why he spent two days at the Casper Events Center talking about them. More than 100 teachers, district officials, parents, business leaders and other students joined Akers for the first round of community-led design sessions called "charettes."

Input collected during charettes will be used for designing renovations to Natrona County and Kelly Walsh high schools and construction of a new, shared campus. The shared campus is planned to house alternative Roosevelt High School, the Transitions credit recovery program, Star Lane Center and the new Center for Advanced and Professional Studies, or CAPS. CAPS will offer advanced and technical courses to students from all district high schools.

"Everyone who comes in here has their agenda," Akers said. "The most important thing we need to agree on is some things need to move to the new school."

The large-group planning session discussed one high school system in three locations, said John Pfluger of Cuningham Group, the firm designing the new high school campus. A second round of charettes, scheduled for May 24-26, will divide the group among each of the three sites. Results from both design sessions will be presented to the community at that time.

During the Wednesday charette, participants shared big ideas for learning and reviewed the Path to 2025 document, which was the result of research and discussion that began in 2008.

"We didn't start from ground zero," said Amy Yurko of Brain Spaces, a consulting firm working with RB+B Architects. "We called it translating - what can we take from that document to translate into facilities?"

Staff members from the design firms reviewed the ideas from the first day and consolidated them into four "guiding principles" for future planning:

Collaborative learning communities. Inventive learning settings. Meaningful community partnerships. A culture of empowerment. "This is not 2025, but it flowed directly from it," Pfluger said. "It's now about doing."

One of the hardest parts of the charette, Yurko said, was discussing how programs would be shared by multiple schools. One sketch showed larger academies at the CAPS campus with smaller versions at the schools, with the different groups connected.

"[Students] might travel through all three campuses, if that's where their education takes them," Yurko said. "They might spend all their time at one campus."

Yurko said they'll likely return to that concept a few more times.